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Love Manifested in Hospitality

By Christy Warner

In *Alcestis*, written by Euripides and adapted by Ted Hughes, Admetos faces the loss of his dear wife Alcestis. During this time, a good friend named Heracles stops by for a visit not knowing that great mourning has settled over the entire household. Hospitality is critical to the way of life during the time period that this play is set in and Admetos must choose whether to host his friend or not in this burdensome time. Hughes uses Admetos' difficult situation to suggest that hospitality is an aspect of love when the actions are driven from the heart.

Love has many sides and descriptions that help to categorize it and help people understand it. It is not always easily recognized because love may not be clearly stated as such. A famous passage depicting love in numerous ways is 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7 from the Bible, which says:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

The love described here is unconditional and can be displayed through individual actions such as simply being willing to listen or going out of

one's way to lend a hand. Even if the expression of love is not explicit, sometimes it takes the form of one of these smaller illustrations such as simply being patient or tolerable of another person. One of these aspects of love manifested in actions is that of hospitality, which can also be described as kindly giving of one's possessions and time without expecting to receive anything in return. When a person is being truly hospitable, they are offering what they have to their guest not because they have to but because they want to and without reserve. Some may offer the use of their house to a guest because it is their duty, but that does not really demonstrate hospitality in the true sense of the word. It must be given joyfully and out of the goodness of the heart. Admetos clearly offers true hospitality because he wants to when he "welcomed Apollo—any mortal might think twice before opening his house to a god" (Hughes, 47). While not many others would be willing to host a god in their house, Admetos is the exception because he gladly allows Apollo to stay without expecting anything. He is rewarded however, with good fortune anyway as a result of his loving actions. His upstanding action is well noticed throughout the kingdom and is very highly approved.

The same original motives lie behind the hospitality that Admetos provides for his friend Heracles. He is not thinking about what reward he can gain from offering hospitality. According to custom, it is proper etiquette to provide hospitality to someone who comes from afar for a visit. It is also perfectly reasonable to turn that same person away if they

arrive during a very inconvenient time such as the day of a funeral as is the case for Admetos. This funeral is a huge event because it is not just a foreign person who died, but the treasured queen, Alcestis. Therefore, there is a major conflict that Admetos has to resolve in choosing between these two righteous deeds of hosting his friend or devotedly honoring the dead. Each one can be rationalized in his place. In the end, he declares

This living man means more to me than any other. How could I turn him away? . . . It would be too easy to throw up my hands and tell him the funeral customs can't be bothered with him, today. But I don't feel that way. I want to accept him – welcome him. My heart has room to bury and mourn my wife without rejecting my dearest friend in his need.” (Hughes, 45)

The reasoning behind his decision reflects the way he cares for his friends. Even when it is difficult, he is willing to put others' needs before his own. Explaining that he can mourn his wife and provide for his friend at the same time emphasizes how much love he holds in his heart to share. The warm reception is obviously not for his own gain because having Heracles in his house adds one more layer of stress to his life and is a great inconvenience. The servants must now provide feasting and entertainment for Heracles as well as help out with the funeral arrangements. Admetos is instead doing a good deed for a friend who means a lot to him and Admetos wants Heracles to feel welcome. The chorus, which is comprised of citizens of the kingdom, says that

“hospitality is one of the sacred mysteries” (Hughes, 46), suggesting that it is hard to always understand motives behind the actions of hospitality, but when offered, it is a great gift that should not be passed up. The reasons lie with the giver and often display the giver’s character and state of heart.

When hospitality is shown to a friend even in the worst of times, the action indicates a deep affection of brotherly love for the person upon whom it is bestowed. The Greeks categorize this kind of love as *philia* love and it includes a strong feeling of loyalty between friends. Admetos highlights this by saying, “simply because disaster from heaven has shattered my family—that’s no reason to abandon my duties to such a friend as Heracles” (Hughes, 46). Admetos cares so much for Heracles that he is willing to mask his own grief and tend to Heracles’ needs.

As the passage from Corinthians says, love is often characterized as selfless. It can be displayed through personal sacrifice. Sacrifice is such a good demonstration of love because it is patterned after the greatest sacrifice of all: that of Jesus Christ when he died on the cross for the sins of the world. No greater act of love has been made nor can any compare, but humans attempt to emulate Him as best as possible. Admetos displays love when offering complete hospitality to Heracles despite the fact that he and his entire household are in deep mourning for his beloved wife, Alcestis. This is a great sacrifice on his part in being willing to divert his attention somewhat from his deceased wife. He was

not required to open his house to Heracles. However, in response to Heracles' discussion of leaving, Admetos says, "Nothing can be done about the dead, you must let me honor my guest" (Hughes, 44), indicating that he must give his love to those who can still appreciate it and allowing Heracles to stay is one way to do that. He perseveres in convincing Heracles to remain in his house. Admetos goes above and beyond even just providing a place of lodging to Heracles. He tells his servants to "show our guest where his rooms are. They are always ready. Then serve him food and wine . . . he is my dearest friend" (Hughes, 44-45). Admetos' hospitality knows no limits and he treats Heracles like royalty supplying great feasts complete with wine all for Heracles' enjoyment. Love is furthermore embodied in this action because Heracles does not even recognize what a great sacrifice Admetos has made for him until one of the servants directly explains the situation to him. Admetos does not originally make this offer for the sake of his reputation or to be thanked for his kindness. At this point, Heracles himself testifies to Admetos' loving actions by calling him the "lord of hospitality who made me so welcome even in his worst hour" (Hughes, 82). Heracles also claims "there is nobody to touch him for loyal friendship, for kingly behavior. A man of this temper shames every other man or woman to match him in nobility of spirit" (Hughes, 82), implying that he feels the love spilling over from Admetos through his generous and selfless

behavior. It is a great virtue indeed to possess the willingness and love that spurs on the offering of true hospitality from the heart.

Actions of hospitality can be very strong indicators of love especially when they cause a disturbance in an already troubled residence. It takes a selfless person to be willing to wait on the needs of others when they themselves have immediate needs as well. Admetos' love and loyalty for his friend Heracles is obvious when he provides the greatest hospitality in his own time of grief.

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